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Gun violence's toll a relentless form of terror

FOUR PEOPLE are killed and about 265 injured in the Marathon Day bombings and their aftermath and thereupon follows an astonishing outpouring of grief, compassion, media coverage, and money. In the year since, an estimated 235 have been shot — 35 of them dead — largely in Boston's poorest and predominately minority sections and we have seen . . . almost nothing. Why?

To even ask that question, to draw the comparison, may seem almost sacrilegious. Yet it is being asked, particularly in Boston's communities of color, by some who look at the extraordinary consideration given to those who suffered in the bomb blasts — the best of health care, millions of dollars of donations — and wonder why the same treatment, resources, and concern have not come their way. One Boston, they wonder, or two?

There are reasons why April 15, 2013, was sui generis for Boston. Yet there should be lessons too: Sometimes, out of the media spotlight and largely unseen, it's too easy to ignore the daily tragedies occurring in our backyards. Just because they're commonplace shouldn't make them acceptable.

The impact, the importance, of the bombings lies not simply in the number of lives lost. If body count were the measure of a calamity, then the Texas fertilizer plant explosion, which occurred just two days later and killed many more, would have captured much more attention. It didn't, nor did numerous horrendous events that have occurred since then, such as last week's sinking of a South Korean ferry that may have left as many as 300 dead.

Rather, the bombings resonated so profoundly because they were an attack not on individuals but upon an entire city — an entire region, really. If, by some miracle, no one had died that day, it would have been equally awful. That's the nature of terrorism: to put people in fear of their lives and by doing so to disrupt, destabilize, and undermine an entire society.

Terrorism is a sudden attack on a people. The scourge of violence in Mattapan, Roxbury, and parts of Dorchester is a slow-motion kind of terrorism, if you will.

How does a society respond to such an attack? Boston is perhaps a textbook example. Instead of falling apart, the city came together. Instead of hiding in fear, its citizens made it a point to be out and on the street, as the unprecedented crowds of this year's Marathon will doubtless attest. And all of the little things people did — making donations, sending cards and letters — were a way (in the antiseptic language of psychology) of processing the trauma, of demonstrating that, when we are all attacked, we all will come together to protect and care for each other. "B strong" went the slogan, and it's not an exhortation that somehow made our bodies less vulnerable to physical harm. Rather, it's one that gave us courage and restored our spirit.

Boston is not alone for having faced such a trial, of course. New York did in 2001. So too did New Orleans in 2005 and Haiti in 2010, albeit each from natural disasters. And, in each case, Americans reached out (FEMA's sluggishness notwithstanding) to support those affected. It didn't matter whether the victims were rich, poor, white, or black. It was the sense of a city or nation in mortal peril that provoked such deep caring and empathy.

Seen in that context, the Marathon Day bombings appear quite different from the unrelenting barrage of shootings in Boston's poorer areas. One was an attack on us all; the second is the far too common taking of lives.

And yet, ponder whether in truth there really is all that much difference.

A shooting doesn't just kill or injure its intended target. It wreaks havoc on families and friends, of course, and begins to spread fear as others wonder what's next. And when the shootings keep on coming, they're like a cancer eating away at a neighborhood. Terrorism is a sudden attack on a people. The scourge of violence in Mattapan, Roxbury, and parts of Dorchester is a slow-motion kind of terrorism, if you will. Because it happens gradually, one victim after another, it's less visible, less shocking. That makes it easy to become inured, seeing these crimes as just a regrettable fact of life. We need to resist that temptation. Evil that would destroy a community deserves equal outrage, whether perpetrated on Boylston Street or Humboldt Avenue.

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